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ABSTRACT

A successful, elective minicourse in the literature of terror and the supernatural examined various literary works in the light of six goals: to examine the terror motif in fiction (in print and other media), to try to understand the reasons for the continued appeal of the literature of terror, to investigate why representative authors have selected this motiff, to examine the ways in which authors create a mood of terror, to examine the effects of that terror on the quality of the literature and on the reader, and to read and enjoy some representative works in this genre. Guide questions imposed unity on class discussions of assigned readings, which were supplemented by a few background lectures and by audiovisuals--mostly cassettes, films, and videotapes. Two Panel discussions and a dramatic reading were also included. The course treated such significant concepts as romanticism and the impact of science on literature, while encouraging development and application of general standards of literary criticism and of comparative critical techniques for different media. (JM)

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"The Literature of Terror: A Theme-centered Mini-course"

Gerald Siegel

For the past two summers, Lamont Cranston, Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde, a number of other characters of unusual reputation--and I--have joined forces in my mini-course, "The Literature of Terror." The meetings seem (in retrospect) to have been worthwhile--for me, for the students, for our department, and (perhaps) for the literary memories of the toothy Transylvanian and his friends.

The notion for the course grew from my own interest in terror and the supernatural and from our department's need, in the face of declining enrollments in literature courses, to attract more students, especially non-majors. A switch by York College of Pennsylvania to a 3-5-5 summer schedule provided the vehicle for creating such a course. And our department-wide recognition that most people read in thematic areas rather than in chronological chunks led me to put together the minimester and the course idea. The combination worked.

Course enrollment has ranged from 15 to 22 undergraduates of sophomore level or higher (since, despite the junior-level course number, completion of our freshman English sequence was the sole prerequisite, and I could waive even that). Few of them were English majors. They were nevertheless a highly motivated group, since the course was an elective and the subject matter was obviously oriented toward a very specific interest. (Anyway, they all seemed to enjoy working with terror--who else, other than a confirmed masochist, would knowingly enroll in such a course?) This may be a major reason for their overwhelmingly strong performance in the course.

We set up a series of five goals for the course and spent most of the semester examining various works of literature in the light of those objectives: To examine the terror motif in fiction (in print and in other media),

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including the Gothic, the grotesque, the psychological, and the supernatural; to try to understand the reasons for the continued appeal of the literature of terror; to investigate the reasons why representative authors have selected this motif, and determine their purposes in selected works; to examine the ways in which authors create a mood of terror; to examine the effects of that terror upon the quality of the literature, and upon the reader; to read and enjoy some representative works in this genre.

Unity was imposed on what might otherwise have deteriorated into aimless discussion by the use of guide questions. A basic set of general considerations provided a common ground for approaching all of the works in the course and reinforced our intention to examine non-print media as well as fiction, although specific longer works were also approached through supplementary discussion questions--for example, a "Vampire Watcher's Guide" used for all the works dealing with that legend.

The course was presented in fourteen three-hour sessions on consecutive weekday mornings in late May and early June; one additional session was used when many of the students devoted an afternoon to rehearsing a dramatic reading of the play version of "Dracula." The three-week format dictated some procedures, especially a reliance upon the assigned readings themselves and use of oral approaches in working with those readings instead of inclusion of papers and reports. Hence, the course was conducted along discussion lines (sometimes instructor-directed, but usually student-generated). This was supplemented by a few background lectures and by audiovisuals, mostly cassettes, films, and videotapes. Two panel discussions and the dramatic reading were also included.

The opening session was devoted briefly to introductory business, including the usual administrative details; then the lights were dimmed, the curtains

drawn, and we responded to one kind of terror: an episode from the radio series, "The Shadow." Discussion followed readily. This set the pattern for the rest of the course--initial responses to some example of the literature of terror followed by analysis and discussion, usually quite spontaneous.

In the case of this radio episode, student observation on techniques used to develop suspense and to lend a quality of supernaturalism served as beginnings for critical sensitivity to patterns and trends which we also noted, as the term progressed, in many of the assigned works, regardless of medium. (The students were intrigued, for example, by the way in which early Gothic fiction exhibited characteristics similar to those of the radio play.) A sample of what they found includes:

1. the presence of unexplained phenomena. (For example, consideration of the nebulous manner in which the Shadow's invisibility is accounted for.)
2. the heavy reliance upon atmosphere (treated in different ways in different media, of course).
3. reliance upon historical background and a legend motif.
4. manipulation of the listener (or reader) through withheld information, "red herrings," or other gimmicks.

Not only did we begin to see quite early that the various forms of the literature of terror had much in common; more specifically, the students' experience with the radio play provided a surprisingly effective background for the ensuing four sessions, which explored Gothicism. The reassurance of having first encountered a relatively familiar medium seemed to put the class at ease in their subsequent dealings with what for most of them was unfamiliar literature.

We spent the next four meetings (sessions 2-5) considering Gothicism and early romanticism as revealed in a number of works of horror and the extraordinary or supernatural. First we turned to an early example of a

story of unexplained violence (well, unexplained until the end of the tale)--E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Mademoiselle de Scudery," a work about a series of violent murders committed by a demented jeweller who could not bear to part with his creations. Additionally, we read a pirated version of the story (entitled "The Jeweller of Paris" in the New York Mirror in early 1841); this pairing of stories allowed me to remark briefly on the copyright situation in the nineteenth century and thus to explain why a number of the writers we considered had achieved neither fortune nor widespread fame. My comments proved to be less important, however, than the students' discovery in this tale of two flaws that they later noted as damaging other works of the "terror" genre. First, the story built a strong atmosphere of tension only to subordinate it to another concern (the young protagonist's relationship with the killer and his daughter); second, they saw that the story failed because it tried to accomplish too much. (Throughout the course, I observed continual development of this ability to apply objective critical standards in making judgments.)

We looked next at Walpole's Castle of Otranto. Our aim here was twofold: we considered the novel as a pioneering effort in a field which rapidly burgeoned and also examined it as a source of critical standards by which we could judge the originality of later works. The students quickly noticed those devices of the work designed to inculcate terror--the atmosphere, the involved plot, the bizarre incidents, the "supernatural machinery" (as Sir Walter Scott labelled it) of the work--and also saw just how contrived and obvious these gimmicks were. They also complained about the novel's structure, claiming that it, like the Hoffmann tale, lacked unity. Further, since The Castle of Otranto is, of course, a rather short novel, and since the Hoffmann work is a rather long tale, these student criticisms led to a critical discussion of the problems inherent in working with the novella form and in adapting that form to the special purposes of creating terror.

The third session dealt with one of the other "standard" works in the course, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. This novel surprised many of the students--here was a supposed "horror" story written by a talented woman (!)--an authorial possibility which they had apparently not entertained--narrated through an unconventional multiple point of view and concerned, not with gruesome details, but with a conflict between morality and science. They were struck by the contrast between this novel and the other works which we had thus far considered--in depth, in quality, and in bringing to life the vivid horror, not of the monster, but of Victor Frankenstein's dilemma. Once again, the initial examination of a work of terror expanded into related critical areas--the backgrounds of romanticism, the importance of imagination, and various of the theories of Coleridge.

In a change of emphasis, the rest of the early sessions turned to popular literature and concentrated on examples from the pages of early nineteenth century periodicals. One story, "Mateo Falcone," was included in the course because it so effectively shocks the reader with the abrupt execution of son by father. "Mr. Justice Harbottle" exemplifies use of unexplained ambiguity and illustrates the manner in which much of the literature of this genre operates, leaving the reader caught between a questionably plausible explanation and a temptingly supernatural one. Three other stories reveal how a seemingly normal individual can experience terror when thrust into an unexpected threatening situation. The strongest protagonist sensations in this group are, predictably, those experienced by the hero of Poe's pseudoscientific "Descent into the Maelstrom." It seemed rather purposeless to include the typical grotesque tale to represent Poe's ability to instil terror in a reader, since the students knew about this; here, on the other hand, we could approach a Poe work which depicted terror within a character. But the

students identified more readily with the protagonist of "A Night Adventure in the Alleghenies," in which the frightened main figure hides all night in an inn closet to escape a strange apparition which the morning light reveals as a fellow traveller who had apparently suffered a fatal seizure. Empathy was strongest, however, for the protagonist of "The Drop Scene," one of a number of pure "sensation stories" which appeared in American magazines beginning in the 1830's. He spends hours dangling from a rope in what is apparently a deep pit--the victim of his own practical joke gone awry. The tale recounts his panic at the prospect of imminent death--certainly a proper subject for such a work; then, abruptly, he swoons, falls--and awakens chagrined (as is the reader) to learn that the dreadful drop was--two inches.

Most of the class readily agreed that a higher degree of talent was evident in the last group of tales of the course's opening sessions. The presence of credible causes of mental disorientation and abnormality characterized these works. Although most of these stories were ambiguous enough to at least suggest the possibility of supernatural forces at work, the class (perhaps because of our current preoccupation with realism) viewed them as achieving their effects because the reader could imagine himself as disoriented as were the protagonists. These stories included the following (the interpretations were those favored by the class):

1. "The Traveller's Tale of a Terribly Strange Bed"--This is essentially a crime story; the victim of a conspiracy is disoriented when he awakens from a drugged sleep to discover that the bed in which lies is in reality an apparatus for smothering intended robbery victims.

2. "Catochus"--Here, fear turns to panic as the victim of a cataleptic seizure discovers he is about to be buried alive. (The students were not surprised to learn how frequently this plot was used.)

3. "Who Murdered Downie" investigates a bizarre consequence of terror. The physical effects of fear cause the victim of a prank "beheading" to die a very real death.

4. "A Ghost of a Head"--in this tale, a young prosecuting attorney, driven to hallucinations by a sense of guilt which grips him following the

execution of a man whom he had convicted on weak evidence (for reasons of political advancement) kills his wife, in the mistaken belief that the head he is beating is the decapitated one of the prisoner.

5. "A Railway Panic"--Terror seizes the protagonist, trapped alone in a railroad car with a homicidal maniac.

6. "Julie Janvier"--The protagonist narrowly avoids death at the hands of a friend who becomes a homicidal maniac as a result of obsession with hereditary insanity.

7. "The Lady of Belisle"--This is an early study of (apparent) schizophrenia in which the Lady's lover learns that his beloved spends part of each year in a second personality.

As I've noted, most of these stories could well have been explained in terms of the supernatural; indeed, the earlier literature we had examined seemed to confirm such readings. Yet my students overwhelmingly viewed them as psychological studies--although all the tales are at least a century old.

Sessions 6-10 turned out to be the highlight of the course. We spent these classes comparing different versions of a single legend which seems inextricably bound up with the literature of terror--the legend of the vampire. For obvious reasons, I've entitled this part of the course "Vampire Week"--and it's proved the most popular segment.

"Vampire Week" is organized as a comparative study of the legend in fact (not really a contradiction), in fiction, and in various media. Again, I had multiple objectives. First, of course, I hoped to consider the works within the overall context of the course. Second, I viewed this segment as a chance to lend depth to what was essentially a survey. Third, I hoped to awaken the students to the differences inherent in handling <u>any</u> theme in a manner making effective use of the strengths and limitations of specific media.

Choosing once more to approach the unfamiliar by way of the familiar, I started with a videotape of the television version of <u>Dracula</u> (starring Jack Palance). Another important reason for this choice was the strong

emphasis this version placed upon a linear plot presentation. Having thus absorbed the main details of the story, the class was better able to deal with the variations which appeared in the other versions. After first viewing the televised Dracula, the students found little about which to comment; however, they did make comparisons with this version as they looked at the legend in other forms.

For purposes of clarity and to provide an indication of the approach we took to other media versions, I will present a sample of those class findings here, although they actually emerged over the week that followed the showing. While I do not intend to similarly detail the responses to other forms, the students, in general, observed how the authors or creators of each version tried to exploit the characteristics of their chosen medium to create terror in the reader or audience and noted how in some instances (chiefly in early visual media) weaknesses crept into the story.

Here, then, is a sample of the class's observations about the televised version:

1. It contained changes in the plot line and elimination or revision of characterizations to increase plot continuity.

2. There were attempts to affect reactions to characters--some indications were provided that might arouse sympathy for Dracula, for example. (I told the class I felt this resulted from director's decisions.)

3. Use of special effects, including music and sound effects, was calculated to develop atmosphere.

4. Quite obvious were different visual and photographic techniques, including reliance on close-ups and "tight" shots (since the version was prepared for a small screen), hand-held camera shots, and editing (for example, rapid cuts to suggest movement).

I also encouraged a fifth reaction by comparing the way we tended to view Dracula in terms of the visual images we had seen, while we varied widely in describing characters such as Victor Frankenstein, whom we created in our imaginations from information provided by the novelist.

Vampire Week continued with a brief lecture on the probable model for

Stoker's protagonist, one Vlad Tepes, a medieval Rumanian prince who was of so bloodthirsty a family that he earned the name "Dracula"--little dragon or "little devil." (His father, similar of disposition, had been styled "Dracul.") Most of the material for this lecture was drawn from a paperback book which several of the students later purchased--In Search of Dracula.

After background had been thus established, we worked with two fictional versions of the story. The first was a rather short account, "The Vampyre" by John Polidori, an early (1819) vampire tale which seems to have had its source in a fragment of a novel by Lord Byron (included, along with Polidori's version, in the Bleiler collection). The second was Bram Stoker's famous novel, which we examined in much greater detail and which produced most of the comparisons the students found. We looked at Stoker's novel in terms of its fictional qualities (character, narrative method, and so forth) and the general course guide questions; however, we also approached the work through more specific questions, including those in the Vampire Watcher's Guide.

The next step was to view a filmed version of this story. When the best-known version (with Bela Lugesi) proved too expensive for inclusion in our film budget, I turned to Fred Murnau's silent version, Nosferatu, which the college had purchased earlier for use with a film course. (The silent film medium and the unusual circumstances surrounding its production provided some interesting side-lights as well as the alternate view I had sought.)

Finally, a rehearsal and reader's theater production of the play version provided still another treatment--one that clearly revealed manipulation of the basic elements of the story (including considerable simplification of character and plot). The play project eventually brought about the active involvement of the entire class, since those who didn't take parts served as

crew (we used some rudimentary light and sound effects) or participated in a series of panel discussions which followed and commented upon it.

The course concluded with four sessions that sampled more recent literature. We began with another horror classic, Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, another work which surprised the students. As in other cases, they had vague preconceptions about the novel, but had never read it, and were surprised to find the horror of the monster Hyde stalking the London streets subordinated to a retelling of the Faustus story with a clear moral warning against tampering with forbidden scientific knowledge. Continuing an approach from the previous week's work, discussion of the book was paired with a media presentation, a voice-over version of the silent film starring John Barrymore.

We finished our look at older tales with a brief glance at two which used incidents of terror as parts of works with some other primary emphasis--"The Ledger," essentially a mystery, and "The Strange Ride of Marrowbie Jukes," an Indian-setting "tall tale."

The most recent long work of terror almost suggested itself--The Exorcist. (Ironically, this is one selection I'm thinking of changing the next time I offer the course.) I was surprised to find that most of the students viewed this as a weak novel, basing their judgments on our earlier studies. They found it flawed because of excessive reliance upon coincidence and uneven character development. Further, they found it flawed as a work of terror because it lacked originality--the devices it used to create terror were too obvious and could generally be found in earlier works.

Because of current interest in the occult and the supernatural, and because these concepts had recurred in the materials of the course, the penultimate session was devoted to a pertinent film, "The Occult," and a panel discussion on reasons for widespread interest in these topics. The panelists

were faculty colleagues with expertise in anthropology, psychology, and religion; their presentations soon involved questions and comments from the entire class.

We concluded with three short works--the ironic tale "The Escape," a contrived story of a deliberate attempt to convince a sane protagonist of her mental instability, "The Vanishing Lady," and a chilling story about an alarmingly precocious infant, "The Small Assassin." Then the students had the last word in an open session that allowed them to comment on and react to the course. (This session was also used for submission of unsigned student course evaluations.)

My evaluations of the students were in fairly conventional form, as the syllabus indicates--three quizzes and a class participation grade (important because of the way the course was handled). Class discussion was almost the entire basis for this grade; I therefore found a need for some instrument which could at least slightly objectify my estimate of this criterion. I finally decided upon a checklist and rating system, to which the student could reply.

Most students did well in the course,--a result, I suspect, of their self-motivation and of the minimester format, which meant, for most of the students, at least six hours daily spent with the materials of the course.

My own evaluation of the course is that it was quite worthwhile. Was it a course in trivia? I think not. A glance at the authors studied should partially forestall such an objection. Further, as I've pointed out in my account of our activities, the course treated such significant concepts as romanticism and the impact of science upon literature. Further, it encouraged development and application of general standards of literary criticism and of comparative critical techniques for different media.

I'd like to digress now for just a few moments to single out two characteristics of the course which I feel have especially wide applications--the emphasis on theme and the use of a compressed or "mini" semester.

An emphasis on theme rather than genre or chronology does seem to make a course attractive to students, and, as I've shown, need not lessen the value of a course. Perhaps the best reform would be to retain traditional courses and add thematic ones. But this is not always a practical possibility; in such cases, serious consideration should be given to shifting to a thematic emphasis.

Although not universally accepted, the compressed course certainly seems (handled correctly) a good idea, and one that has already proved itself at the high school level. Why should it not be adopted, perhaps in modified form, in two and four year institutions of higher education? Sharing ideas is, after all, a two way street.

Indeed, there <u>is</u> a need to offer a course such as this in a compressed context. With so specialized an approach as "Literature of Terror," interest must be maintained at a high level. This is easy to do over three or even five weeks. It might even be possible on a once weekly basis (perhaps as part of an evening program) during a regular semester. But I fear that the student interest which made the course a success would certainly flag were the material presented thrice weekly, fifty minutes at a time.

Teaching in a compressed semester does necessitate adaptations in conventional teaching techniques; the teacher who takes on such a course should expect to be flexible. Let me turn to "The Literature of Terror" for just a few examples. First, I found that audiovisuals and supplementary materials had to be presented in class, since the reading list left the students little time for independent outside work. The paucity of "extra" time <u>must</u> be reckoned with in such a course, especially since a number of the students

also held part time jobs and many of the non-English-majors were weak readers. Second, writing projects and research papers prove impractical; for this reason, I chose to add an emphasis in oral communication and created the participation rating. Third, testing procedures may need to be modified. As I have already mentioned, I elected to meet this problem by substituting long weekly quizzes for cumulative testing or a final examination.

Looking back over the course as a whole, I must ask myself whether I have reservations. Well, yes, I do--a few. I see a need to revise the selections in my own text. Some of the reading choices no longer seems so appropriate; The Exorcist, once useful, now seems dated. Most of all, I feel some regrets about what I did not teach--important figures such as Bierce, Lovecraft, and James, and more selections by such masters as Poe. But the summer was short, the session even shorter, and I am at least satisfied to have presented as much as I did, if not totally pleased.

I'm encouraged by the students' evaluations of the course. (Each student was asked to complete an evaluation form rating the teaching and the course.) Two-thirds of the respondents rated the course "excellent" overall--a positive sign which indicates to me that English departments should look favorably on mini-course presentations, that "terror" is a subject of some interest to today's students (something the moviemakers knew long ago), and that theme-centered courses may be one way of halting or even reversing a trend toward declining literature enrollments.

So, in conclusion, I'm pleased with the experience--pleased with the course, pleased with the student response, pleased that I get requests for the course almost weekly. Besides, the assistant dean in charge of the summer sessions, who scans course offerings in a Janus-like fashion that views them through both academic and economic eyes, has asked me to repeat

the course. And I'll probably do it.

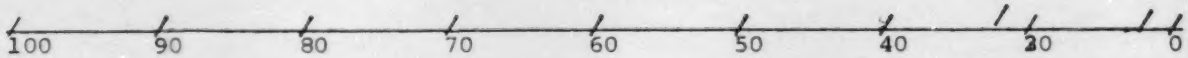
Still, there are so many other fascinating sorts of literature around. Have you heard about Agatha Christie's last book?

Class Discussion Evaluation

Student:

Class:

Rating:



The following descriptions provide a rough guide to the rationale behind the ratings. The reverse side may be used for rebuttal, additional information, etc. This rating can be further influenced by additional information or by a last minute improvement.

100--Not only a leader, but a catalytic force within the class who creates a more meaningful experience for all students with incisive, lucid comments and interpretation.

95--A leader in class discussion + activities. Generates meaningful comments on material. Often presents new insights. Reveals outstanding command of materials of course.

90--Participates and contributes consistently to class discussion + activities, and contributes to overall knowledge with insightful comments. At times generates such discussion. Reveals superior command of materials of course.

86--Participates and contributes regularly to class discussions and contributes to overall knowledge. Demonstrates better than average command of materials.

82--Often participates and contributes to class discussions and adds meaningfully to those discussions. Demonstrates better than average command of materials.

78--Frequently participates in class discussions, often making meaningful contributions. Follows and amplifies ideas of discussion leaders. Satisfactory command of materials.

74--Participates in discussion on many occasions, although not necessarily consistently. Can usually respond well to direct questions. Satisfactory command of materials.

70--Sometimes participates in class discussions. Often responds correctly to direct questions. Command of much of the material of the course.

60--Irregularly attends. Rarely participates and only occasionally responds well to direct questions. Minimal command of materials.

20-50--Rarely attends. Neither participates in discussion nor replies correctly to direct questions. Disruptive. If sleeping, avoids snoring.

0-20--Never attends, or attends but snores loudly.